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One man's secret, another man's right to know

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Americans are not by nature secretive; governments are. So it is not unusual to find a tension in Washington—one of the most open capitals in the world—between those, generally in government, who find disclosure of information either awkward or positively harmful and those, generally not in government, who believe that the openness of the American system is one of its greatest strengths. With a strongly anti-Soviet administration now in power, and showing new concern about national security, the old tension has appeared once again.

The issue of secrecy is being debated in two separate contexts. One is national security, which governments are sometimes tempted to equate with their own self-interest. Nearly 11 years ago, when the Nixon administration was attempting to prevent the New York Times, the Washington Post and other newspapers from publishing articles based on the top-secret "Pentagon Papers", one of the main issues of controversy was whether the documents—a defence department history of American involvement in Vietnam—should have ever been classified at all. The more the justice department sought to assert that disclosure of the information would do grave harm to national security, the more the newspapers argued that it was in the public interest to make the material available. The Pentagon Papers were not truly top secret, said the press; they were merely stamped with that designation to help conceal government deceptions and prevent embarrassment for policymakers.

Ultimately the Supreme Court agreed with the newspapers, refusing to block publication of the information, and ever since there has been a war, formal and informal, against overclassification of federal government documents. Members of the press and private citizens alike succeeded in having documents declassified by filing lawsuits under the Freedom of Information Act. Some government officials, including the former director of central intelligence, have been forced to

protect the documents that genuinely deserved protection was to avoid classifying those that did not.

Mr Jimmy Carter, while he was in the White House, issued an executive order with a strong bias towards disclosure. It required government officials formally to consider the public's "right to know" before classifying anything, and it said that classification must be based upon "identifiable" potential damage to national security. To be sure, Mr Carter eventually became distressed over leaks of classified information, but he never reversed his policy.

Now Mr Ronald Reagan has reversed it, issuing his own executive order with a bias towards secrecy. Not only does it eliminate the right-to-know and identifiable-damage provisions, but it also says that, when in doubt, officials must classify material at a higher and more restrictive level, rather than at a lower one more readily subject to declassification. It also creates a new category of temporary classification, allowing lower-ranking government workers who have no formal authority to stamp documents secret to do so none the less, pending a review by their superiors. What is more, it expands the broad categories of information that may be classified.

What with rising unemployment rates and the continuing recession, an executive order on the classification of government documents is not the stuff of widespread public debate. But for those who watch such issues closely, such as civil libertarians, Mr Reagan's order was an important step towards a more restrictive information policy. Administration spokesmen acknowledged that it was intended to make it more difficult for judges to rule in favour of plaintiffs under the Freedom of Information Act. Although the order specifically forbids the classification of information to conceal inefficiency or prevent embarrassment, that is precisely what is expected. And it seems theoretically possible that some

Rather different are the attempts of several of President Reagan's senior hardline advisers to prevent foreign adversaries and competitors from picking over the findings that flow from America's university laboratories. But their calls for drawing the scientific wagons into a circle are also getting a hostile reception, particularly from an academic community that increasingly regards the administration with distrust or even enmity. A panel of the defence department's own senior boffins recently cautioned the Pentagon that science and secrecy make a poor mix; they warned it that to insist on campus security would interfere seriously with its own cherished goal of re-establishing the co-operative ties that it enjoyed with academic science before the Vietnam war.

Secret research is not the issue, since almost all that was swept from academia in the campus upheavals of a decade ago. Anxiety is focused instead on the above-board fundamental research, particularly in the physical sciences and certain esoteric branches of mathematics, that constitutes the basis of tomorrow's technology. Some of this has potential for military applications.

The outstanding advocate of greater secrecy is Admiral Bobby Inman, deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency. In his previous post, as director of the National Security Agency, Mr Inman

"NOT THOSE LEAKS, DUMMY—THE LEAKS OF INFORMATION ABOUT THEM"

